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ABSTRACT

In June 1975, a rural Massachusetts school board developed a comprehensive six-page questionnaire and mailed it to all community residents 17 years of age and older. The questionnaire solicited demographic data, as well as respondents' opinions on a wide range of school-related topics. Besides being administered to the community, the questionnaire was twice administered to the school board--once before the community survey and once after the board was aware of the community's responses. Comparison of individual board member's responses on the first and second administration showed that their opinions did change considerably; of these changes, 56 percent were made so as to align with major community opinions. Comparison of the opinions of the total school board showed that the board moved from 78 percent agreement with community opinion in the first administration to 85 percent agreement in the second administration. (Author/JG)

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BUT HOW DO YOU KNOW THEIR OPINIONS COUNT: THE INFLUENCE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT COMMUNITY OPINIONS ON SCHOOL BOARD OPINIONS

As the official controlling agency of a local school system, the school board has the inherent charge of reflecting and responding to community wishes --a charge that is imbedded in the New England Town Meeting form of government and steeped in long tradition. As Dykes states,

> *"The local school board was developed by the people to enable them to direct the educational destiny of their children.... The local school board is the people's voice and judgment in educational affairs. With it lies responsibility for bringing to bear public wisdom on the most important of all public concern."*[1]

In a period marked by severe economic restraint and increased public scrutiny of governmental agencies, more and more school boards are making concerted efforts to improve community/board communications. Efforts which they feel will make them more responsive to their publics and more knowledgeable of what their publics want in and from local schools.

This article deals with one such effort of a school board in a rural, Massachusetts community. It considers the action taken by that board to solicit public opinion in a systematic and scientific way--the public opinion questionnaire, and, addresses the research question--Does Knowledge of Public Opinion Influence School Board Opinion?

In June of 1975, the school board under study developed and mailed a comprehensive six-page questionnaire to all residents of the community 17 years of age and older. The questionnaire solicited demographic data, as well as community opinion about a wide range of topics such as:

- *major problems with which the local schools must deal*
- *ways in which the local schools were particularly good*
- *qualities which best characterized the local schools*
- *educational changes in the local schools*
- *student success in the local schools*
- *student attitudes toward the local schools*
- *curriculum and methodology in the local schools*
- *classroom climate in the local schools*

[1]Archie R. Dykes, School Board and Superintendent: Their Effective Working Relationship [Illinois: The Interstate Printers & Publishers, 1965], p. 5.

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- *reducing costs of local schools*
- *improving local schools in ways that might mean increased expenditures*
- *responsibilities of the local school board*
- *characteristics of "schools with quality education"*

Analysis of the questionnaire instrument showed it to be reliable and generally appropriate for the task for which it had been designed. And, an analysis of the self-selecting sample of approximately 20% of the community (N = 1028) who responded to the questionnaire showed the sample to be an accurate representation of the entire community, although response from females was proportionately higher than response from males; and response from those persons with children currently in school was proportionately higher than those persons with never any children in school, or those persons who had had children in school at one time in the past.

Besides being administered to the community, the questionnaire was twice administered to the school board (N = 5): once before the board was knowledgeable of community opinion and once after the board was knowledgeable of community opinion.

Comparison of individual school board member responses on the first and second administration of the questionnaire showed that opinions did change (see Table 1 for further detail). The lowest amount of opinion change was 16% for one member and the highest was 25% for another member. The average amount of opinion change was 22%: the most significant point being that 56% of these opinion changes were made so as to align with major community opinions.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL BOARD RESPONSES (N = 5) ON THE FIRST AND SECOND ADMINISTRATION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE TO DETERMINE THE ALIGNMENT OF RESPONSE CHANGES WITH THE MAJOR RESPONSES GIVEN BY THE COMMUNITY (N = 1028)

School Board Member	Maximum Number of Responses to the Questionnaire:		Responses on the Second Administration that were Different from the First Administration:		Response Changes that Aligned with the Major Responses of the Community:	
	1st Adm.	2nd Adm.	Number	Per Cent	Number	Per Cent
1	69	69	11	16	7	64
2	69	68	14	21	6	43
3	69	68	13	19	8	62
4	69	69	16	23	11	69
5	57	64	19	25	9	64
TOTALS & AVERAGES:						
5	333	338	73	22 (Ave.)	41	56 (Ave.)

Comparison of the opinions of the total school board after the first and second administrations of the questionnaire also provided evidence that the board, as a body, changed opinions so as to align with major community opinions (see Table 2 for further detail). As a body, the board increased from 78% agreement with community opinion in the first administration to 85% agreement in the second administration; this represented an approximate 9% increase in the alignment of total school board opinion with major community opinion.

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF RESPONSES OF THE SCHOOL BOARD (N = 5) ON THE FIRST AND SECOND ADMINISTRATION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE WITH THE RESPONSES OF THE COMMUNITY (N = 1028)

Administration of Questionnaire	Maximum Number of Responses that could have been made to Properly Complete the Questionnaire	Number of Responses Made by:		Number of Responses that were the Same for School Board and Community:	
		School Board	Community	Number	Per Cent
First	69	75[a]	75[a]	56	78
Second	69	72[a]	75[a]	61	85

[a] *The number of responses exceeds 69 because some questions had more than one answer evenly selected by the respondents. A variance of 0% between responses was used to determine that more than one answer had been evenly selected in questions 2, 3, 16, 17. A variance of 10% or less between responses was used to determine that more than one answer had been evenly selected in questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18.*

Given the circumstances that a school board, by its own design, was interested in learning the opinions of its community, and, that the school board, by its own design, was motivated toward that end by soliciting public opinions, an appropriate opportunity was provided for research of an actual slice of government. It was an opportunity for comparison of community and school board opinions toward a school system. But further, it was an opportunity for researching the influence that scientifically and systematically gathered knowledge had on the opinions of a school board.

This case study of one school board indicated in measurable ways that the opinions held by the board did represent the major opinions of the board's community. But even more importantly, it indicated that knowledge of public opinion influenced the board to align its opinions to be further representative of the community. It would, therefore, seem appropriate that other boards seek to know what their publics want in and from their schools as they go about the very important task of setting appropriate directions for public education.